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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9432
INFO RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA 2110
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 8902
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RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 3082
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RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHDC
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RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL//CCJ2/CCJ5/CCJS//
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SIPDIS

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REF: A) ADDIS 0027 B) ADDIS 0053

SUBJECT: USG HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TEAM: DEGEHABUR ZONE FIELD
VISIT #1

SUMMARY

1. (U) Summary: Between December 27 and 30, the U.S. Government (USG) Humanitarian Assistance Team (HAT) in Ethiopia program officer, health and nutrition specialist, and safety and security officer traveled to Jijiga and Degehabur zones in Somali Region as part of an initial field visit to assess humanitarian conditions. The purpose of the field visit was to raise the visibility of USG presence, gather sectoral information with an emphasis on health and nutrition (REF: ADDIS 0053), examine security and access issues (REF: ADDIS 0027), and lay the groundwork for future USG HAT travel in the region through meetings with regional, zonal, and local officials. USG HAT staff also examined livelihood, food security, and water and sanitation conditions. The poor performance of gu and deyr rains in 2007 has negatively affected water and pasture availability in parts of Somali Region, including Degehabur Zone. In addition, local residents report that reduced commercial activity and GFDRE restrictions on livestock and population movement are further undermining livelihoods and food security. End summary.

Livelihoods

-- Commercial Food Trade --

¶2. (U) Delays in required military escorts in Degehabur Zone continue to hinder commercial traffic. Military escorts are not required from Jijiga to Degehabur towns, according to non-governmental organizations and Ethiopia National Defense Forces (ENDF) stationed in the area. However, commercial trucks are currently delayed for weeks awaiting military escort for onward travel from Degehabur town, according to U.N. staff and local residents. The USG HAT did not observe any commercial traffic on the road from Jijiga to Degehabur or along the 35 kilometers (km) southeast of Degehabur that the team traveled. Local traders also noted a decrease in overall commercial activity in the area. However, villagers along the main road reported seeing a limited number of commercial trucks in recent weeks.

¶3. (U) USG HAT staff report significant variation in commodity prices within Degehabur and Fik zones. On December 28, USG HAT staff interviewed a local merchant in Degehabur town. Based on transactions with Fik traders, the local merchant reported that commodity prices in Fik Zone are up to two and half times more expensive, specifically in Garbo and Buhun districts. Reported prices include 220 Ethiopian birr (ETB) for sugar in town, compared to 700 ETB in the Fik districts; 280 ETB for rice, compared to 500 ETB; and 115 ETB for spaghetti packets, compared to 250 ETB.

-- Commercial Livestock Trade --

¶4. (U) General insecurity, border restrictions, and the increased presence of the ENDF in the conflict-affected areas of Somali Region have resulted in a significant reduction of commercial livestock trade, according to local traders. Traders report that camel sales have declined from an average of 500 camels per week, pre-conflict

escalation, to approximately 7 to 10 camels per week. Currently, the primary market for camels in the area is for local slaughter due to the absence of cross-border traders, representing the export market. Local camel brokers emphasized that the decline in camel sales is not due to supply, but to reduced demand from cross-border traders reluctant to operate in the conflict-affected areas.

-- Livestock Movement --

¶5. (SBU) USG HAT staff received reports from local villages of Government of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia (GFRDE) restrictions on population and livestock movement in Degehabur Zone. In Sandihle village, located 25 km south of Degehabur town, villagers reported that the GFDRE had restricted livestock movement to prescribed areas around the village. In addition, local residents stated that the GFDRE required the local population to remain in fixed locations and that only men, unaccompanied by women or children, were permitted to move with livestock within the prescribed areas. In the context of failed rains and reduced pasture, the restrictions are of significant concern as it prevents populations from moving herds greater distances to access available water and pasture. In Obale village, located 123 km south of Jijiga town on the main road leading to Degehabur, villagers also reported livestock movement restrictions.

Food Assistance

¶6. (U) USG HAT staff report that dispersed and reduced food distribution points (FDPs) are undermining local access to food assistance in Degehabur Zone. In Obale village, residents reported that Obale now serves as the consolidated FDP for six previous FDPs, resulting in roundtrip distances between 30 and 66 km for former FDP village food assistance beneficiaries. USG HAT staff note that food distributions are primarily collected by women and children. Local residents reported that men are reluctant to collect food assistance due to security concerns regarding pervasive ENDF presence.

¶7. (U) USG HAT staff received similar accounts from local residents in villages located southeast Degehabur town. In Sandihle village, residents reported traveling 30 km roundtrip to the nearest FDP. In Garowe village, one woman stated that she had not collected her food aid allotment due to the six-hour roundtrip travel required.

Water and Sanitation

¶18. (U) The poor performance of gu and dyer rains in 2007 has negatively impacted water availability in parts of Somali Region, including Jijiga and Degehabur zones. Local communities along the main road between Jijiga and Degehabur towns and points further south reported reduced water access and availability. Villagers stated that hand-dug water reservoir levels were at one-half to two-third 2006 levels and reported a lack of transport to distant water points.

¶19. (SBU) In Obale village, local residents reported reduced water levels and, in one instance, military confiscation of a private water reservoir. (Note: According to Obale residents, the ENDF has been utilizing the local primary school as a military base for approximately ten months, preventing children from attending classes. The USG HAT observed the continued presence of military personnel and vehicles at the school. End note.)

¶10. (U) In Sandihle village, residents reported limited water availability. One woman estimated her family water usage at four liters per person per day-less than a third of the Sphere standard recommended 15 liters per person per day. Sandihle residents indicated that a lack of transport to distant water points is a significant obstacle to water access, due to a lack of pack animals. USG HAT staff speculate that the lack of pack animals may be related to reduced purchasing power, resulting from reduced cross-border livestock trade, as well as the impact of restrictions on internal movement within Somali Region on local trade activities.

CONCLUSION

¶11. (U) The collective impact of the poor performance of the gu and deyr rains in 2007, reduced commercial trade, and GFDRE restrictions on cross-border, population and livestock movement in the conflict-affected areas of Somali Region are negatively affecting livelihoods and food security in Degehabur Zone. In addition, dispersed and reduced FDPs in the region are undermining beneficiary access to food assistance.

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